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ABSTRACT

Described is a home- and center-based preschool program for handicapped children. A toy education library system and an activity centered learning program are reported to focus on individualized programing and parent involvement. (CL)

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Community - Involved Pre-School, Developmental Program

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Too often, many private and public programs are developed involving pre-school children without parents; Too often, parents abdicate the role of "teacher" to the child; and too often the pre-school period of time passes too quickly and the child is not ready academically or socially for school. It is known that home based intervention programs have a positive effect on the child's development. Therefore, a program at home, and at a community center should aid the child's growth.

Some objectives of the Community Based pre-school program are the following:

1. To involve parents, during the child's formative years in order to interact in a positive learning environment with their own children, and/or with other children.
2. To become familiar with techniques and materials that will help to teach basic skills and basic concepts to their children.
3. To have children actively involved in the learning process.

In order to meet these objectives, a multi-faceted pre-school program has been developed. One aspect of the program is a toy education library. The other program is an activity-centered learning program.

The toy educational libraries maintain the following standards and qualities:

1. Providing experiences which help to develop simple skills to complex skills.
2. Providing learning experiences in:
 - a. Multi-sensory skills
 - b. Abstract-concepts
 - c. Classification
 - d. Fine-motor contour
 - e. Colors
 - f. Numbers
 - g. Language
3. Providing materials which a parent and child are able to assemble easily.
4. Providing simple directions so that parent is able to feel comfortable in "teaching" without extensive homework.
5. Providing materials so that parents are able to develop a positive relationship with the child to help develop the child's self-concept.

The 10 toy libraries are located throughout the community. Elementary schools, as well as community buildings are utilized as central disseminating facilities. There are eight wards in the city, thus there is a center in each ward. Parents participate in a volunteer training program. In order to appropriately disseminate the toys. Parents who take out the educational toys are able to borrow them for a week. Instructions are included in each of the games. Workshops have been developed to meet the parents needs. The following are examples:

1. Language skills as related to the educational toys.
2. A "Make and Take" whereas, parents were able to make from one - ten developmental toys.
3. Role playing with "toys".
How to modify and adapt educational toys.

In addition to the toy library, an activity centered learning program for pre-school children has been operating at the Oak Grove Community Center of Ward 4 in Malden, Massachusetts. The program has been primarily for the purpose of pre-school development of children. During this time children with special needs have been identified and integrated into the program. An experienced special education professional and parents have volunteered their time and donated materials to the project. At this time the program is at a stage of readiness for expansion in terms of developing a prototype which can be established in other centers in the city. Two more satellite programs are being set up with funds from the Human Resource Department, Community Block Grant.

The program begins in September with coffee hours to outline the program for the parents. Informal training of parents starts. A multi media approach consisting of slides, film-strips, and transparencies are employed. After this two week workshop approach the parents come with their children to the program for further instruction as well as interacting with the children.

The literature is abundant with research demonstrating that the most effective manner for children to develop and attain their fullest potential is through interaction and intervention at an early age. Optimal learning experiences are a necessity for children in order that they achieve mastery of social skills, cognitive skills, and psychomotor skills. It is vital for children with special needs that they have structured experiences so that they may learn in general and specifically that they may learn that which other children acquire incidently.

Typically children progress through the sequence of developmental stages in predictable fashion. The acquisition of basic skills is easily internalized from daily experiences. However, the children with special needs require the structure of specific programming to reach satisfactory levels of achievement.

Program designs for meeting the needs of children with special needs must consider a multi-faceted approach. Programming should reflect individual needs and learning styles. Simultaneously, systematic programs for parents should be instituted to reinforce the childrens' program as well as to promote overlearning of basic skills. Learning tasks should incorporate applications of concrete materials and situations in the learners environment (neighborhood and community).

The activity centered approach with parent involvement and the utilization of a toy library characterized by activities similar to those in the learning center will enable this preschool development of these children. Programming can accomodate not only the individual needs of the children but also their varied attention spans. Multiple activities for tasks as well as modifications of tasks provide for accomplishment in a brief, uncomplicated, and sequential manner while involving typical, above average and special needs children.

Children with special needs, have been described as having poor visual and auditory memory, difficulty in understanding cause and effect relationships, imprecise perceptions, impoverished language and difficulty in generalizing. The program is designed to meet the needs of the children both developmentally and remedially.

The program is a highly structured situation in which stimuli to which the child is exposed are carefully controlled. Thus a sense training program aimed at developing language, auditory discrimination and auditory closure would be expected to provide the preschool child with an image of the world relatively understood by irrelevant stimuli. Specific goals are to teach self-help skills, group interaction skills, language skills, self-control skills, basic skills and concept. Behavior modification principles are to be employed.

Parents are trained in appropriate learning techniques to work with their child objectively. Specific goals are in understanding play and self-expression, developing and modifying tasks, and helping the child toward greater independence.